

# A Princess of Kent

BY MARJORIE BOWEN

CEDRIC the churl looked up from the basket he was weaving of osier bands and listened.

The thick woods of Kent lay to right and left of him; a path wound through the clustering trees, and, as it dipped to the distance, there was a flash of vivid blue sea.

The autumn foliage, faded to hues of gold and brown, rustled in a bright sunshine; dead leaves strewed the ground, but grass of a clear green grew in patches beneath the trees.

In this little clearing in the forest stood a wattled hut. The thin smoke curled slowly from it in delicate spirals against the cloudless sky; at the doorway stood a yellow-haired child, clasping a rough red pitcher to the bosom of her striped frock.

Cedric, seated on a log, listened.

The sharp notes of birds broke on the stillness and the soft sound of coming horses.

The little girl came lazily across the grass, the sun dazzled in her brilliant hair and on her bare brown arms; she sang to herself happily.

Through the trees, riding swiftly from the sea, came a party of horsemen; they rode in single file by reason of the narrowness of the path, and trotted so, one at a time, into the clearing, where each halted, waiting for the next.

Cedric moved the completed osier baskets behind the log, so that they were secure from thievery or accident, and stared leisurely at the strangers. There came forty or more of them, and a few serving men.

As they gathered there, a confused group, gazing to right and left, the blue eyes of the Saxon were stolidly observing them.

He saw men handsomely dressed in travelling mantles lined with fox and beaver, their horses laden with packages and fair painted coffers; the servants had

bundles at their backs. Dark men they were, with high, sharp features, unarmed, distinctly not warriors; they conversed together in a soft strange tongue, leaning from their saddles towards each other with wondering anxious faces. Two kept themselves apart: one, a haughty, handsome man of an imperious presence, who held his purple mantle carelessly at the breast with a white ringed hand, and stared round him with bright black eyes; the other, different in dress and bearing from the rest, a man clothed in armor linked with gold.

The Saxon child crept up to her father's side, eying the strangers, and one of them, turning, looked at the man and the hut beyond.

He wheeled his horse round and spoke in Saxon, a little halting.

"This is the kingdom of Kent?" he asked. "Surely it is so?"

Cedric nodded.

The other travellers turned to listen, and the two apart watched composedly.

"Listen," said the first speaker. "We are invited of the King—your King; we are from across the sea, certainly. I am Frankish. I come because my language is the language of this country. These," he glanced round at his companions, "are from Rome, verily. Where is your King?"

"Canterbury," answered Cedric. "And who be ye?"

The stranger indicated the man in the purple mantle.

"He, the prior Augustine, hath been sent by the Pope to convert this land of Britain faithfully," he said. "We are his humble company. We bring knowledge of the true God, verily."

Cedric gazed at Augustine.

"Is it the God," he said, "whom the Queen hath a chapel in honor of? A place, lordings, with fair colored windows."

"Verily the Queen Bertha of Kent

hath such a chapel, and a holy man who daily holdeth service; truly, through this righteous woman's workings upon her husband, hath he written to Rome for servants of God to come and preach the true faith in the land."

"It is a goodly chapel," the churl replied. "And many repair there in wonder. It holdeth a picture of a fair-faced man, and a cloth worked in silk and the hair of the Queen."

The stranger, smiling, answered:

"Many more wonders than that will we bring ye, for our God healeth the sick, yea, and raiseth the dead."

Then another interrupted, saying:

"Wherefore hath not the King sent to welcome us? Last night we landed, and, behold! there were none—neither folk nor lodging. Verily, we have slept beneath the trees. This morning one came saying, 'Here are horses and food,' and with that departed hastily."

Cedric shook his head.

"I know naught. The King is at Canterbury."

They looked at one another. "The road is strange to us, certainly."

"But ye cannot mistake it," said Cedric. "Riding through the wood ye come upon an open road. Follow it; it shall bring ye to Canterbury."

The priests set their horses in motion. There was great jingling of bits and harness, and the sun made a gallant show of the furred and embroidered garments.

Cedric picked up the unfinished basket. The child, idly holding her pitcher, stood by his side, with fearless blue eyes considering the strangers.

"Beware of the wood," said Cedric, "if ye bring new gods."

A priest with his fingers in the reins turned and asked sharply, "Wherefore?"

"It belongeth," said the churl, putting back his yellow hair, "to the old gods, and they are jealous."

He fixed the osier bands between his knees and began skilfully plaiting them.

"Mostly," he continued, "it belongeth to Freda—she hath a well there."

"She is a false god," returned the priest; "an idol—an image, such as we have come to destroy utterly."

"She is the wife of Thor," said Cedric, "and she sits in the wood yonder by the well."

"Truly that is a lie," said the priest, calmly. "And unholy men have deceived thee. She is not there—certainly ye may search and never find her."

On the ending of his words rose a burst of laughter, so clear and sudden that they started in their saddles.

It came from the child.

"I have seen her," she said.

They stared at her.

"I have seen Freda sitting by her well," she went on.

"Child," said the Frankish bishop, "ye spoke of what cannot be. Lies have deluded ye."

But the girl shook her head.

"I have spoken with her," she persisted. "She cometh from the well."

The priest's dark face grew stern.

"Here is deceit and a device of the devil," he said, apart. "Child, ye saw nothing."

She laughed again. "I will tell ye the manner of her. She is a goodly goddess, small, with white feet. She sits in the well—something she sings, and leaneth sideways to gaze into the water."

The priest frowned.

"They even wallow in their error! When the King is converted, Kent will be also converted, and ye will see the folly, child, of falsehoods, verily."

But she only smiled and turned away with her pitcher. There was a pause. Augustine gazed after her; then he spoke to the Frank, and his voice was cold.

"What doth the pagan say?" he asked. "I must learn the Saxon, certainly!"

"She speaketh of her false gods," was the answer. "Lo! they are deep in error."

The priests rode on in stately fashion across the clearing. Cedric paused from his osier plaiting to watch them go, but the child, holding her pitcher in the tinkling stream, sang unconcernedly of Freda as the clear water bubbled into the lip.

Two abreast now, for the path was wider, the priests proceeded through the forest. The ground was soft with acorns and beech mast, and the trailing brambles glowed orange and scarlet with berries; a multitude of birds sang continually, and the sky was a marvellous blue.

The only one of the company who was no monk, the knight Valerian of Ravenna, began to sing for joy of the weather and the fresh wind blowing lightly on

his face. For here were no slumbrous airs nor swooning sunshine, as he had known in Italy, but a clear brightness and an exalting freshness. It had rained lately, and the autumn perfume of damp earth and leaves was in his nostrils. Now and then the startled deer fled at their approach, slipping like red shadows through the yellow bracken; rabbits fled across their path, and pheasants with splendid plumage.

The knight Valerian, brother of Augustine the prior, began singing the louder:

"What hope have I of gaining heaven,  
Myrra—when the virtues are few,  
Myrra—when the sins are seven,  
And the sweetest sin is you—is you!

"Surely I have no need of heaven  
(Sins that are seven),  
When the sun shines gold through the  
shade of the vine,  
And thou art mine—and thou art mine!"

At that, Augustine checked him; for how, said he, "shall he that is profane convert the pagan?"

But Valerian laughed as if the pagan were no great matter, and held up his hand with its green ring, and watched the light slip in and out of the jewel.

"It is a smiling land," he said. "Right glad am I, I came, certainly."

"Surely it shall shine more," said Augustine, from his purple hood, "when it is under the power of Rome."

Valerian plucked a spray of ash berries as he passed the bending tree.

"Yet the old gods keep it gay, verily," he smiled; and in his pleasant voice the song rose again:

"What hope have I of a saintly crown,  
When the world is so sweet,  
And two hands draw me down,  
Two lips to meet—to meet!

"Surely I have no need of heaven  
(Sins that are seven),  
When the grass is green and daisy pied,  
And the shadows hide—the shadows hide!"

Then he fell to silence and thinking of the child's talk of Freda (for he knew the Frankish tongue).

Valerian the knight was good to look upon; he had a face such as the old Romans gave their gods, smooth and very

proud; his hair curled a little under his helmet, and was, like his eyes, dark as the horse he rode.

Augustine the prior was very like unto him, save for the pallor of his face and his monk's dress; yet in pride and splendor he was his equal, for he took his mission in no humility, but imperially.

Both shone in embroidery, square cut colored stones, and the rich, dark hues of Byzantium. From Valerian's shoulders hung a silken cloak of red hue, and round his full, bare throat was a golden chain.

The greenwood spread and broadened about them; it seemed that the fair loneliness increased as they advanced.

The train of monks and serving men rode in silence; Valerian fixed the ash berries between his horse's ears.

"The King," said Augustine, laughingly, "should have sent, certainly, even to meet us graciously."

"As I do think," replied Valerian, "he doth wish it to seem thou hast come of thine own will. Maybe he feareth the old gods, verily."

Augustine's dark eyes surveyed him sideways.

"Something art thou of a pagan, Valerian."

The knight laughed.

"Lo! this wood is beautiful, certainly," he said. "The little maid spoke of the gods dwelling here—lo! I look for them fearfully."

The sun was creeping towards the horizon; here under the trees the great shadows lay, and the blue of the sky was burning pale and cold.

"Surely I have no need of heaven  
(Sins that are seven),  
For the calm of the dawn is over the sea,  
And the touch of thy hand is all to me."

They had reached the bottom of a little slope, up which the path wound, to divide at the top into a fork.

It was thickly grown with ash and beech trees that cast a gloomy shade, and in the midst of them was a well green with moss and fern.

The cavalcade paused, uncertain which path to take.

"Freda's well," said the Frankish bishop. "Surely we will dedicate it to some holy saint."

The well was circular; fern and grass

that the dripping water had kept fresh grew around it; behind, through the silvery trunks of the beeches, glowed the rose hues of a cloudless sunset.

Valerian took off his helmet, hanging it to his saddle bow; and the breeze that blew from the west lifted the heavy hair from his forehead.

Slowly they rode up the slope with a jingle of bells and a glimmer of brilliant color darkly visible.

Valerian, a little ahead, suddenly stopped, a noble figure on the dark horse against the smooth beech trunks.

He said nothing, but gazed in front of him, leaning forward a little, his throat and face in profile above the rich armor.

The monks paused too.

Something was moving in the deep shadows of the well.

The hanging ferns and grasses were stirred and rustled; a white arm, dripping crystal drops, held back the wet green, and a woman appeared among the fern.

They saw her but dimly, for the rosy light of the sunset did not touch the deep beech shadows. She stood a second, utterly still, with that outflung arm holding back the ferns. There was naught on her slender body save a yellow shift; nothing to hide her but the shadow and the drooping bracken.

"Freda!" said Valerian. "Freda?"

At the sound of his voice she looked towards him, and drew away.

A little shudder ran through the monks. The figure made no attempt to move or speak; pale as ivory she gleamed in the dusk.

Only Augustine rode calmly to his brother's side.

"Speak to the woman," he commanded. "Bid her begone, certainly, and put no tricks upon us."

"It is the goddess, verily," answered Valerian, breathlessly. "Lo, she moves!"

"Certainly a false goddess," frowned Augustine. He raised his clear voice:

"Witch, devil, begone in the name of the Holy Virgin!"

As he spoke he raised the cross he wore.

She took no heed; only she made a shivering motion, and pulled the boughs about her.

"She understandeth not Latin," said

Augustine, and he called to the Frank, who rode up swiftly.

"Fiend or woman," said he in Saxon, "profane not the ground where holy men must tread. Delusion of the devil, begone!"

She gave a moaning little cry, and smote her hands upon her bosom.

"Thor! Thor!" she cried, and ran swiftly from the shadow.

For a second the rosy glow shone on white limbs and yellow hair, then she was gone into the thick darknesses of the trees.

Augustine's lip curled.

"So the false gods go, surely," he said. "Let us press onwards to Canterbury hastily."

But as the company was proceeding down the wider path, Valerian spake.

"I will come presently. Lo! have I not come to convert? Certainly I will convert the pagan goddess."

A little he laughed.

"Pleased she me mightily."

"Therefore," said Augustine, sternly, "thou wilt follow her in mere profanity?"

"Therefore will I follow her to bring her to the true faith, certainly," Valerian answered. "Or if she be a fiend, bring I her to Canterbury on my saddle," and he turned and made his way warily into the thicknesses of the trees.

The stout yellow bracken caught his horse's hoofs and stayed his progress; the path he followed narrowed and twisted; in his ears were the sound of whispering leaves innumerable and the echo of his brother's angry voice.

"Now, by St. Honor," he said, "back will not I—"

As he spoke, the wood fell away before him to right and left, as if the trees made a sudden passage, and he found himself at the top of a hill ending so suddenly it seemed the edge of the world that touched the western sky—the burning, blushing sky, fading stains of gold and red, like molten jewels, spilt blood and wine, that shone before him.

Straight up against this stood the woman, on the very summit and edge of the hill, with the dipping valley at her feet.

The yellow shift, blowing, showed her bare feet; across her throat waved little

strands of yellow hair; she looked towards the sunset as if she prayed.

"Freda!" said Valerian, gently.

She turned, saw man and horse dark against the wood, and fled through the forest.

Horse and man plunged heavily after her, but ways were open to her that were closed to them; she sprang with great lightness through the bushes, and Valerian, with the boughs in his face and catching at his sleeves, lost sight of her.

He laughed, and, reining his horse, turned the way he had come through the wood.

"What need have I of heaven

(Sins that are seven),

When the sun shines gold through the  
leaves of the vine,

And thou art mine—and thou art mine!"

The dew was falling; he felt it on his face as he looked up at the first stars glittering through the leaves; it was neither day nor night, but a marvellous time of twilight. Idly he rode on, his reins falling slack, and in his brain memories of the day slipped together: the line of white above the blue sea that was the shore of Kent, the ride through those first woods, so different from his woods at Ravenna, the little hut in the clearing, with the smoke arising in the still way of autumn, the man with the beautiful osier baskets behind the fallen log, and the child with her red pitcher clasped to her breast.

He found himself by the well again, and rode round it slowly, picturing the white arm that he had seen divide the fern.

His horse stumbled over something; a heap on the ground. As he leant from the saddle he saw embroideries gleam duskiy.

Swiftly he dismounted; a woman's clothes lay at his feet—a rich robe, a red mantle, and leather sandals among the fallen beechnuts.

Freda's garb! He lifted them from the dead leaves and put them over his saddle. They were heavy with gold fringes and beads; he handled them curiously; then knotted the reins to a beech bough, and waited for her to come for her garments. The moon rose, turning the grayness into silver. Valerian seated himself

by the edge of the wall, crushing the soft damp ferns; he trailed his hand in the water; it was cold as snowflakes. Holding on to the rim, he gazed down into the blackness of the well depths, forming visions of a woman rising, floating upwards, with the water weeds on her breast, till she touched the surface, and the water broke in ripples from her face as she emerged, holding up dripping arms, glittering in the light of the rising moon.

A light sound behind him made him look up sharply from the well.

She was close to him, standing by the beech tree; she shivered cruelly.

For a moment they gazed at each other; then she held out her hands.

"Give me my garments," she said, mournfully. "Am cold."

He made no answer; the moonlight striking through the trees showed his Byzantine beauty and cast his shadow dark behind him.

The woman came a little nearer.

"Am afraid," she said. "Give me my garments."

She shuddered under the thin linen of her shift, and looked around timidly for her attire.

"Thou art human, certainly," answered Valerian, marking her shivering. "St. Honor! but I thought ye one of the gods of Britain, verily. Lo! I am a Christian knight, and bear unto pagans a dislike, mightily."

"Am cold," she repeated; she came still closer. "Art terrible to look upon." Curiosity came into her voice. "Hast a sword and great weapons—art Thor or a daemon?"

She lifted her long yellow hair from her eyes to gaze at him; the moonlight lay over her as she bent closer.

Valerian made the sign of the cross over his glittering breastplate.

"I loathe thy false gods bitterly—there is but one Lord, and Him serve I faithfully."

Blue eyes gazed into black eyes across the moonlight and the shadows of the fern; hers were troubled. She put out her hand and touched his where it lay on his breast.

"Am cold—cold," she said, sadly. "Feel my fingers."

Valerian frowned.

"Thou art a witch," he said, "and thy

power lieth in thy garments certainly. Lo! I come to do war on such as thee—even I.”

“Am no witch.” She drew back against the beech trunk. “Art cruel.” She eyed him in a troubled manner as he leant forward with a clink of armor from his seat on the well.

“I will convert thee, hastily,”—he laughed a little. “Thou shalt become Christian presently. Listen unto me.”

“Am no witch,” she repeated.

“Yet a follower of false gods,” said Valerian.

“My gods are true,” she answered. “Give me my garments.”

“But ye shall hear me, verily.”

She drew herself up, and her hands clenched.

“Greatly I hate ye,” she said through her teeth.

“What is thy name?” asked Valerian.

She stood rigid, erect, staring down at her bare feet on their carpet of dead leaves.

“Nay, tell me; we will give thee another. Augustine shall baptize thee holily.”

Her hands went up to her face; she fell to crying softly; she slipped down on to the beech mast in a curled up position of distress.

“Am cold,” she murmured, through faint little sobs. “Am weary—am hurt—”

She glanced piteously at her foot.

“Am afraid of the wolves.”

She turned her face against the beech trunk and wept unrestrainedly in a quiet manner.

Valerian rose and brought her garments from his saddle to lay them beside her.

“Thy garb,” he said.

She glanced round timidly; then, seeing her dress beside her, smiled.

He stood looking at her as she arrayed herself in silence with a shudder of content. When she had clasped her hood under her chin and put on her mantle there was little of her to be seen for the heavy loose draperies that fell around her.

Gravely he picked up her sandals and offered them.

She looked at her foot.

“Am hurt,” she said. She seated herself on one of the spreading beech roots,

and showed him that her foot was cut across the instep.

“It paineth me,” she complained, and the tears welled into her eyes.

“Ye are a coward,” smiled Valerian.

She fell anew to sobbing, with a piteous look at the injured foot.

“I will tie it up for ye, certainly,” said Valerian. “Yet I do not think it hurteth mightily.” He turned back his velvet sleeve and tore off a strip of the linen underneath; she followed this with a curiosity that stifled her sobs. By this the moon had risen high, and the well was distinct in silver light. Valerian dipped his bandage in the beautiful water and brought it to her.

She watched with interest and satisfaction while he bound the wound up, kneeling before her.

When he had finished he delicately laced the embroidered sandals over her slender feet.

She said nothing till he rose and turned away; then she cried out:

“Am afraid of the wolves—ah! am bitterly afraid.”

He looked back at her. She smiled.

“Wilt stay?” she asked.

Valerian reseated himself by the edge of the well.

“Ye are a coward, certainly,” he said.

“Yet had I no thought of going. Did I not leave the others to find ye, that I might convert ye, even I?”

She frowned at that; great self-confidence had come with the wearing of the mantle and gown.

“Didst follow me?” she said. “Wherefore?”

He fingered the long fern fronds beside him. “To find if ye were fiend truthfully. To bring ye with me to Canterbury; and because ye are fair, mightily.”

She drew herself together in her heavy draperies.

“Shalt not take me to Canterbury,” she said, wildly. “Wilt not come—hate thy God—”

He gazed at her in terror and anger, and his brows lifted with wonder.

“Who art thou?” he asked.

“Hate thee,” she answered, vehemently.

He rose.

“Thou art fierce, certainly,” he said, “and I must even leave thy soul to damnation and thy body to the wolves.”

At that and the sight of him untying the reins from the beech boughs her courage fell; she wavered between terror and anger; then:

"Am *bitterly* afraid of wolves," she whispered.

"Will ye come with me to Canterbury?" he asked.

For answer she beckoned him to her side, and when he came heavily over the dead leaves, she caught his hand between hers, and gazed up at him with frightened eyes.

"Am Osberga of Kent," she said in a hurried whisper. "Am the King's daughter. Lo! he will be Christian; he sent over the sea for Christian priests, but I—I love the old gods—they are very gracious to me—will be true to them—so am fled here—will to my mother's sister in Mercia."

Panting, she ceased, and her little hands clasped in an eager manner over his.

A flush crept into Valerian's smooth face.

"I am of the Christians," he said. "Thou shalt return to the King."

"No! no!" she implored. "Would go to Mercia."

The moonshine was over her very wonderfully. It caused her bare throat to gleam like ivory. Valerian, the Byzantine knight, laughed, and drew her to the well, and made her sit beside him there, with the waving shadows of the ferns over her dress.

She came without resistance, gazing at him the while with wide blue eyes.

"The old gods are dead," he said, holding her slackly by the arm. "The saints rule in heaven now. Listen. I come from Ravenna, which is a Christian town. Canterbury will be a Christian town."

"Therefore have I left it," interrupted Osberga of Kent.

"Ye shall not avoid the true faith; Britain will be a Christian land."

She shook her head.

"Thor will prevent it."

"Have I not said the old gods are dead, certainly?"

She smiled scornfully.

"No," she said. "They neither die nor sleep. The Queen hath a chapel to thy God, and she hath won the King to listen, and the old gods will be wrathful—and I go to Mercia."

Leaning forward, he still held her arm, and looked down into her upturned face.

"Go ye to Mercia alone?"

Osberga of Kent shook her head.

"Ethelfrid, who is King of Mercia, is coming for me; last year he came to Kent—"

Valerian interrupted her, frowning.

"This King is late," he said.

"Have lost my way," she said, mournfully. "Shouldst be waiting by the river. Lo! he will be there, and I cannot discover the way."

At the thought of it she began weeping softly again.

Valerian frowned more, and gazed at the tracery of the fern fronds in the moonlight.

"'Tis best, verily," he said, "that ye should not meet this pagan."

"Is brave," she whispered through her sobs. "Is a great man—is King of Mercia. I sent to him to take me away when the new God came; lo! he sent a churl back, and said on this day he would wait by the river." Her sobs ceased; she looked at Valerian in an anxious manner. "Think ye they will come after me before I find the river?"

He answered gravely:

"I think that I should take ye back presently. This man is a pagan, certainly."

"Will not take me," she frowned. "Hate Canterbury. Often do I come here to bathe in Freda's well—it maketh ye fair—often do I come here as the sun sets to be rid of Canterbury. Will not go back."

"I might make ye," said Valerian, quietly.

She looked at him. There was a breathless pause; then he spoke again.

"I might put ye on my saddle and take ye back to Canterbury with me. To save your soul, certainly."

Osberga put her hand over her heart.

"Why—am afraid," she said, pitcously. "Am afraid—and Ethelfrid is not here. If ye choose to take me—" She stopped, gazing with frightened eyes.

Valerian sprang up impetuously, and his face was flushed.

"St. Honor, no!" he said in an unsteady voice. "Ye shall keep tryst faithfully—ye shall go with the pagan King."

Wherefore should I stop ye? To each man his gods."

And he laughed to think what Augustine the prior would have said.

Osberga of Kent gave a little panting breath of relief. "Will stay till the morning?" she asked. "Cannot find the river in the dark—maybe Ethelfrid will come for me."

He turned, and seated himself slowly in his old place, his mantle all about him on the mossgrown earth, the moonshine on his dark Roman face. He looked at her curiously, and his fingers played with the gold chain that hung on his breast.

She smiled sweetly on him.

"Art kind," she said. "Ethelfrid will thank thee."

"Need I no pagan's gratitude, certainly," he answered.

There was silence as they sat opposite each other with the trees and the silence about them; then Osberga spoke, yawning.

"Am sleepy," she said. "Am tired."

Her blue eyes were half shut; her head drooped.

"Ye can sleep fearlessly," he answered. "By St. Honor, I will not leave ye!"

She gave a sleepy smile.

"The earth is hard," she murmured. She shifted her position on the well edge and gazed into the black water. "It looks fearful, yet it is not deep. When I stand in it, it cometh only to my neck; yet I would not fall in."

Her voice fell in a tired fashion, her head drooped.

"Am *very* sleepy," she announced.

Moved by a sudden impulse when he saw her weary, drooping, and desolate against the cold earth and dripping ferns, stirred by tenderness and he knew not what feeling of pity, Valerian leant forward and held out his arms.

She looked at him sleepily from the shadow of her hood; he touched her and drew her very gently towards him.

To his wonder and extraordinary pleasure she came willingly, and lay with a sigh of content on the folds of the soft mantle that fell over his armor.

Her eyes closed, and her breathing became faintly regular. Warm and flushed and soft she lay, curled in her heavy draperies in the curve of his arm, with her head against his breast. Her yellow

hair fell from her hood over his knee; she was sleeping very peacefully.

Valerian put his mantle round his shoulders and held her loosely up to him.

Now and then in her sleep she gave a little sound of ease and content, and her face was like a child's; in her lap her fingers lay curled slackly and rosy; under the rich dress her bosom rose and fell steadily.

Valerian, holding her in his arms, gazed out over her drooping head at the moonlit forest, and thought of his saints at Ravenna and the pagan King waiting at the river.

So still they were that a little troop of deer passing out of the beeches came fearlessly to his very feet, and sniffed his shining grooves and her trailing gown before they passed on lightly into the forest.

Valerian's thoughts flew wide, circled the world and the world's goods, judged and appraised the worth of things, and came back to the wonder of the moonlit forest and the sleeping woman in his arms.

Slowly, wonderfully, the moon died and the day rustled through the trees. Light that was very pale and luminous slipped through the beech trunks; the birds commenced singing in a clear manner. Osberga of Kent stirred and sighed; he drew her closer to his heart, praying she might not wake yet, for surely it was sweet to enfold her helpless sleep. Her head had fallen back on his shoulder; as the day dawned he saw her face more clearly, her parted lips, her golden brows, the yellow hair falling apart over her white forehead.

His horse made an impatient movement, shaking his trappings, and there was a sudden sound of branches broken and thrust aside.

Valerian looked up calmly.

A horseman crashed down the bracken and drew up a few paces from the well.

The pale dawn showed him a mighty man. He was helmeted, and carried his shield on his arm; both his mantle and his horse were ivory white, and even in that dimness his hair shone golden.

In utter silence he gazed at the two beside the well.

"Thou art Ethelfrid of Mercia, certainly," said Valerian.



The horseman started to hear his tongue and name from the lips of this splendid stranger.

"Am Bretwalda of Mercia," he answered. "Am Ethelfrid." He touched his horse, and came slowly closer; his eyes flashed fiercely, in a wonderful rage; he pointed to the woman in the Roman's arms.

"Osberga of Kent?" he asked, and his bare arm shook, showing the silver snake that bound it glimmering unsteadily.

"Truly," said Valerian, "Osberga of Kent. I am Valerian of Ravenna, and a Christian knight."

The Bretwalda of Mercia put his hand to his sword.

"Wherefore sleepest she in thine arms?" he asked, grimly.

Valerian smiled.

"Truly she was weary with seeking for thee; honors she me greatly. Lo! she sleeps as a child, peacefully." Gently he disengaged his arm from about her, and she fell slackly against him, drooping into the folds of his mantle.

The Bretwalda said naught, but, erect on his huge horse, gazed at them with burning blue eyes.

"I have guarded her faithfully," said Valerian, "and kept her for ye, when I might have carried her to Canterbury—to the Christians. St. Honor pardon me—but to each his gods."

He laughed softly, looking down upon her, and the sun, brightening, smote his gorgeous armor into points of light.

"Art a strange man," said Ethelfrid. "Hast a kingly look." He leant from the saddle, and stared into Valerian's face. "She trusted ye?"

The Roman smiled proudly.

"Ye see, Ethelfrid of Mercia."

The Bretwalda glanced at the sleeping woman.

She stirred, and flung her hand out among the ferns.

"Osberga!" cried Ethelfrid.

She sat up, flushed, suddenly awake, and held out her arms.

"Ethelfrid!"

With the golden glow of the dawn over her, she rose and laughed.

The magnificent Bretwalda wheeled his horse round so that he was alongside her.

"Osberga," he said, "get up before thy father's people come."

Valerian rose, standing beside the edge of the well.

"Shall I not lift her up?" he smiled. "Have I not kept her for thee?"

Lightly he raised her and put her into Ethelfrid's arms; so was she swung on to the white horse.

"Hast been good to me," said Osberga, clinging to the ivory mantle. "Is Christian lording, yet took me not back to the new God?"

The Bretwalda's blue eyes looked steadily, curiously, at the stranger, and Valerian's glance was calm to meet his scrutiny.

"Tied up my foot," said Osberga. "Was gentle to me."

Still the two men gazed at each other. No word of thanks said Ethelfrid; but suddenly he turned the woman round and held her away from him.

"Kiss her," he said.

Valerian, standing beside the well, was not on a level with her face and hanging hair; smiling, she put back her hood, leaning down; the dawn was flaming through the trees and glittering in the water of the well.

Valerian of Ravenna, suddenly pale, kissed her coldly on the brow.

The Bretwalda caught her proudly up to him, lifted his glittering shield in salute, and was gone at a gallop down the forest glade.

Valerian watched the white horse flash between the tree trunks, then mounted his own steed and turned its head toward Canterbury.

Cloudless and beautiful the morning was about him, yet he felt his arms empty and his spirit weary. He noticed coldly the wonders of the forest, the begony with its flaming berries, the last dandelions and daisies, the amber hues of the oak, the scarlet of the beech; then he looked curiously at his torn sleeves. A robin sang loudly; then presently a merle. Valerian of Ravenna rode steadily with his helmet clanking at his saddle, and he smiled to himself, playing with the chain at his breast.

Thus to Canterbury, in the glory of the fair morning.

"What hope have I of heaven.

Myrra—when virtues are few.

Myrra—when sins are seven.

And the sweetest sin is you—is you!"